

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Would We Know Our King if We Saw Him?”**

**Psalm 100
Matthew 25:31 – 46**

Christ the King

November 23, 2014

One of the things that I’m sometimes asked by my friends back in Ohio, is some species or other of the question, “*So, have you seen any celebrities? Have you run into any... movie stars?*” Everybody knows that we live in the Hamptons... so they assume that we’re bumping into “famous” people all the time. And, so I get:

“Hey, did you meet the Kardashians? Did you see Bruce Jenner?”

*“Have you asked Alec Baldwin, ‘Hey, Alec... what’s in **your** wallet?’”*

“Does Paul McCartney go to your church, man?”

And so on.

But, I have to be honest and disappoint my friends... telling them that, no, I really *haven’t* come across all that many celebrities since we moved to Southampton. Oh, I’ve seen a handful of famous people over the years; and I suppose I could truthfully say that I even *know* one or two of them. And I *did* splash Chuck Scarborough into the dunking booth at one of St. John’s Episcopal Church’s summer fairs! But, on the whole, *I’m* probably the most famous person that I know... because, hey, I’m on the radio on WLNG every day once again; at least till the end of the year! Hubba-hubba!

But, my Ohio friends *are* right about one thing: the celebrities *are* out there, right? I mean, I go on Facebook, and one of my friends has excitedly posted: “*We were standing in line at Waldbaum’s and Jimmy Fallon was right behind us!*” And then there’s a photo of Jimmy posing with the kids. Somebody I know saw the pro golfer Rickey Fowler somewhere... and posted a smiling picture of Rickey on Facebook. Ed Dressler keeps me posted on the various glitterati who pass through London Jewelers... but every time I’m in there the movie stars are AWOL, and I might as well be at Zale’s. My *wife* saw Alex Rodriguez at the Golden Pear last year... and she didn’t even know that it *was* Rodriguez! She thought it was Derek Jeter! But she knew it had to be *somebody* famous... because of the burly bodyguard telling everyone to put their cameras away, or else.

And I don’t know how many people have told me about seeing Howard Stern, running out on Wickapogue Road every day. Well I’ve probably run a couple thousand miles in this village, and I’ve never seen Howard Stern once! Or... have I? Maybe I’ve run right past Howard... but just not realized it! Maybe I was distracted, or preoccupied, or trying not to get run over by some maniac driver... and I didn’t even notice that Howard Stern was jogging by, on the other side of the street; just twenty feet away.

For that matter, maybe I've seen dozens of actors, and rock stars, and other famous people... but just failed to recognize them, for one reason or another. Maybe they were wearing sunglasses; maybe they were dressed like slobs; maybe I was expecting them to be as glamorous in real life as they are on TV. Who knows? But, for whatever reason... they were there, and I didn't know it. They were right in front of my face... and I passed them by, without the slightest hint of recognition. I'll bet that sort of thing happens all the time; to me, to you, to everyone in this village.

Now, I want us to keep in mind this idea of not recognizing someone or some-thing that's right before our eyes; this phenomenon of seeing something significant, but not realizing it... because that theme is really at the heart of our gospel lesson from Matthew this morning.

In our text, Jesus is telling a parable about the Kingdom of God; and, in particular, about the need to be watchful and alert for the coming of that Kingdom. Earlier the disciples had asked Jesus, "*When is the Kingdom of God going to come? When is God going to bring to fruition all of His wonderful plans for creation?*" And Jesus had responded to that question by explaining to them that, nobody knows the day or the year... not even Him. Only God knows the timetable for the coming of His Kingdom, and He's not telling.

But Jesus went on to say that, even though we don't know *when* the Kingdom of God is coming, it *is* still coming... at some point! So it's important to live in such a way that we'll be ready for it when it arrives. And He then went on to tell a series of parables, illustrating the importance of being watchful and alert. And our text this morning was the final parable in that series.

Now, in this story that we know as "The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats," Jesus describes a scene from this great Kingdom of God, which will be established sometime in the future. And in this scene, we find the glorified "Son of Man" (which is an expression that Jesus often used to refer to Himself), sitting in judgment of all of the "nations," or all of the people of the earth. And we're told that the Lord "*separated the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*" And that the Lord "*put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*"

And what does the Lord do, once He gets everybody situated into their proper ovine camp? Well, according to the text, He tells both groups that they've been sort of like you and me, not recognizing celebrities here in Southampton! He says to them:

*"You know, I was right there with you, your whole life... and you didn't even know it. I was **right there**, in your field of vision, every single day... but you never recognized me. I was right out in the open... but my face never rang a bell.*

"I'm sure you remember seeing me. I was that flat-broke hungry guy... out on the street, dying for a hot meal. I was that unwashed homeless stranger... with no place to lay my head. That was me, freezing to death in the winter... for want of a coat and a pair of decent shoes.

"I was the one who was laid up sick... with no one to look after me. And, uh, it was even me, there in the county lock-up... wearing my orange jumpsuit and hoping that my cellmate wouldn't punch my lights out."

Now, at this point, the text tells us that the sheep and the goats were all equally confused. They all had no idea what the Lord was talking about. I mean, nobody on either side of the sheepcote was jumping up and saying:

“No, I knew that was you, Lord! I was hip to the fact that you got busted up the island... and spent ninety days in the pokey! Oh yeah, I saw you standing in line at Human Resources waiting to pick up your Thanksgiving turkey! I was on to you from day one!”

No, all the sheep, and all the goats, were saying:

*“That was **you**, Lord? Really? We didn’t realize that it was **you** that was hungry... **you** that was homeless... **you** that was sick! We had no idea that you were lonely, or heartbroken, or feeling like an outcast. If only we’d known... if only you’d given us a sign of some kind, you know, if only you’d identified yourself; we definitely would have been there for you! Honest!”*

Well, by now everybody’s feeling rather... sheepish, shall we say? But then the Lord looks over to the sheep, on His right, and He says to them:

*“Not to worry, folks. Even though you didn’t recognize me, you’re still okay. Because you treated the hungry with compassion; you treated the homeless with respect; you treated the sick with mercy; you treated the imprisoned with love. In other words, sheep, you treated the needy people of your world, your community, the same way that I, myself, would treat them. And in so doing... it’s like you **did... it... for... me.**”*

According to Jesus, when we care for the down and the out and the needy... it’s like we are caring for Jesus Himself.

Which was great news for the sheep, right? I mean, here they are, thinking they’re going to have to go on the lam (get it? On the “lamb?”)... go on the lam to get away from the Lord; and instead, the Lord tells them,

“Well done, good and faithful servants! You’ve loved your neighbor as you love yourself... come and enter into the joy of my Kingdom!”

Unfortunately, the news isn’t so good for the people on the Lord’s left hand... the goats of the story. To **them** he says just the opposite of what he said to the sheep.

*“You know, you guys didn’t recognize me, either. But, unlike the sheep, **you** ignored the hungry. You didn’t treat the homeless with respect... you treated them like a nuisance. You pretended that the sick didn’t really need you; and instead of having godly love for those who’ve gotten into trouble, you have only contempt for them. In other words, goats, you treated the needy people of your world, your community, as I, myself, would **never** treat them. And in so doing... it’s like you **did... it... to... me.**”*

According to Jesus, when we ignore the down and the out and the needy... it’s like we are ignoring Jesus Himself.

Well, of course, the goats tried to make excuses: *“How were we supposed to know that it was you? And so on...”* But the Lord cut them off; and told them: *“If you don’t care about the hurting people of your world... you don’t really care about me. And if you don’t care about me, you’re not going to be very happy in my Kingdom. So, take the train... and be gone with you.”*

Now, we need to be careful **not** to hear this parable as some kind of justification of “works righteousness;” that, if we do enough good works, we’ll be welcome in God’s Kingdom... but if we don’t do enough good works, we’ll get thrown out on our ear. That’s really not what this parable is saying. But what it **is** saying is that we should be living today, right here, right now, as if we’re

already citizens of God's Kingdom; that our *manner* of living, and caring, and loving of others should be consistent with life in that Kingdom.

That's part of what it means for us to live in anticipation of God's coming Kingdom; it's what it means for us to be watchful, and alert, and ready. When we see each other as Jesus sees us; when we treat each other, and care for each other, as if we were caring for Jesus Himself; we are ready for whatever future plan our Heavenly Father has for His creation.

When we love those whom our world has deemed unlovable; when we put our arms those that our culture has said are untouchable; when we care for those who seem to be unreachable; we are emulating, in our own imperfect lives, the ministry of Jesus... and when we do that, we're teaching ourselves what it means to be part of Jesus' Kingdom. And that's important, because that Kingdom is the ultimate destiny of every single one of us.

So, that's why our Maureen's Haven homeless shelter is so important. That's why our Meals on Wings dinners are so important. That's why it's important that we're helping our friends in the Dominican Republic grow passion fruit... and that we're supporting our sister church in Cuba. That's why it's important that *at* this time, *in* this place, *to* this village, we're proclaiming Jesus' word of hope, and forgiveness, and meaning... to a culture which has, in so many ways, completely lost it's way. In all these ways, and in so many others, we're trying to recognize Jesus in the hearts, and souls, and needs, and concerns of those who are around us. And in so doing, we're opening the door to Jesus' Kingdom... and walking in!

The title of this sermon asks the question, "Would we know our King if we saw Him?" May we make it our quest to answer that question in the affirmative... to say:

"Yes! I do recognize my heavenly king... in the faces of those who suffer injustice; in the eyes of those who hunger for daily bread; in the trembling hearts of those who feel overwhelmed by the pains and problems of life; in the outstretched arms of anyone, and everyone, who needs what only the Lord can give!"

And having recognized our King in the lives of "the least of these, our brothers and sisters..." may we minister to them with all our heart, mind, and body. And in so doing... we will minister to Jesus, too! That's our calling, as Christian disciples. That's our life, as citizens of the Kingdom of God!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!